

NEEDLEPOINT

Aoi Fukuyama

Artist's Statement

Needlepoint illustrates the intellectual barrier between a person's lived experience and the understanding of that lived experience by those around them. The work similarly speaks to memory and its decay over time, as the needle, being the singular point of focus remains the only clearly defined object in the scene.

Needlepoint, Aoi Fukuyama © 2018

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A Conversation on *Needlepoint*

Jamie: I don't know anything about sewing, but I recognized—as I think a lot of non-sewing readers will—that the title of the series might refer to a way of making stitches that is typically used for sewing really delicate, intricate images onto fabric. I mention this in addition to the more literal meaning of the title: needlepoint, as in the way these photographs seem to take place at the point of the needle. The phrase *at gunpoint* comes to mind. But I think these two contrasting ways of reading the title work together.

The needle has these connotations of being tied to the home and the feminine, but in your work the needle feels like it represents something almost menacing. It made me think of anxiety if we understand anxiety as the tension of being torn between the present and the future, the tension of existing in the present moment but suffering due to fear of what may happen in the future. In your work, the needle marks that point of tension, it makes that tension intense and palpable by focusing the image on the immediate foreground which causes the background to become ambiguous, blurred, almost lost. The needle becomes a threat at the point where it meets

the world directly beyond where you stand. (Of course, anxiety isn't necessarily bad; it's a physical and emotional response to uncertainty and it's part of what makes us human.)

Having an anxiety disorder and being constrained in what I can manage every day because of it made me think of this before I read your artist's statement, but I was wondering if it's something you've been thinking about too.

Aoi: I've absolutely been thinking about anxiety. I unfortunately can't stop thinking about it. I feel like I have a persistent worry. It's not about anything specific at any given time but it very much feels a lot of the time like I move from one thing to worry about to the next. I think the needle certainly can be interpreted as transmisogyny, racism, capitalism, et al.

I was thinking I suppose most about femininity and domesticity when I choose a sewing needle as opposed to something like a hypodermic needle. Femininity is often regarded as fragile or dainty but needles are sharp and honestly, I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid too, to a certain degree, of femininity, of how contentious my existence as a woman seems sometimes.

I also like how you mention at gunpoint because in college we called photos that had their subject centered, "bull's-eyed." I don't know if you've ever fired a gun, but it's one of the most unpleasant things I've experienced. There was a moment after squeezing the trigger that felt like silence, where I became suddenly and fully aware of the type of power that holding a gun gives a person, even firing at a bull's-eye. The needle absolutely holds an idea about being a certain kind of a target where again, the title directs you to it's point.

Jamie: I know that *Needlepoint* is about more than this—in your artist's statement you also wrote about memory and its decay and the

fundamental problem of being understood by others—but I keep coming back to the like horror film mood that I get from the relentlessness of the needle. There's something of *It Follows* here; not so much any specific aspect of that movie (though it's also deeply concerned with the transition into womanhood and the precariousness of existing as a woman) but the simmering tension of it, how even in the end that tension isn't fully resolved but instead merges with the background, becoming part of daily life.

When I fired a gun before I definitely felt that awareness of its power, and I remember being repulsed by it, almost physically feeling ill at how easy it was to unleash that kind of violence onto the world. That memory of shooting feels closest now to when I've accidentally cut my fingers with a knife while prepping food—what sticks with me about those accidents isn't the pain, it's the terror of knowing that because of my carelessness I came close to causing myself serious harm. In that sense, firing a gun is like cutting a wound into the world.

I was going to ask, do white people ever realize that they're all basically walking around carrying guns and badges? How do they stand it, and doesn't it make them feel sick to have that kind of power, the broad legal permission (or "license to kill" as Lewis Gordon puts it) that allows them to get away with so much? But I mean, we're both non-black women of color, so this is a question that needs to be turned inward too. I don't know if I'm mixing metaphors too much here, but I think we can find a way to turn these photos around or to shift where we place ourselves in relation to the needlepoint to see the way in which we as non-black people can form part of that uncertain, menacing, undefined background for others.

Aoi: I mean, I'm definitely white passing and generally cis passing in a lot of circumstances and know that offers me a huge amount of

protection and I know that in the past, I've gotten away with things a black person has been killed for, which is a hugely sobering and sickening thought. I think it's easy to be a part of that background for other people, all you need to do is nothing. It seems like the world is only becoming more visibly menacing, especially here in the US, and yet, things like police brutality are just background noise to a lot of white people.

I think placing myself in the background of these images actually feels more frightening than the mindset of composing these images, where I was forced to really focus on the needle and as a result, spend most of my time thinking about the point of the needle, which happens to be a position of power, or a major threat, depending on your perspective and relation to the needle.

Jamie: Can you tell me more about your process in composing the images? The light is always different in the photos, it dances around the needle. But the physical backgrounds seem to vary widely too, moving indoors and out in the world, sometimes even into a sort of fog, a setting of placelessness, so I'm also curious about how you decided where and when to shoot and whether you started with these images in mind and sought them out or whether they sort of found you while you happened to be shooting.

Aoi: I think the idea of shooting a needle in so many places started as a metaphor for transmisogyny, and because that's the kind of thing I experience everywhere, I really just kind of took my camera around with me. The photos were shot across three different days. I spent one of those days at home and photographed the spaces I spend the most time in at home, where I'm at ease. I went on a hike with one of my roommate's a different day and photographed a local park that I'm similarly comfortable in. The last day, I spent with my family, who I'm so very uncomfortable with almost as often as

I'm comfortable with them. Because the backgrounds in the photos were going to be such a blur, I just considered the compositions in an abstract sort of way. Some of these images I pre-planned, mostly the ones around my home, but a majority of them I had a general sort of idea of what I was looking for, but the specific images were ones I had to stumble upon while out in the world.

Jamie: It wasn't until now that I was able to picture what the act of setting up and taking each shot must have been like. But I think it's an important image too, stepping back from the photos themselves and seeing you out in the field (or at home), doing this work of looking out and trying to approach transmisogyny through art while also physically wading through it and having to live in an environment of transmisogyny (if we understand this societal hatred of/violence against trans women as being a structural force that permeates everything).

Hearing you talk about working in these different spaces makes me think of how in my own life, even when I'm alone in my room or in my house and feeling as safe and free as ever, I'm still not free of transmisogyny. It follows me because I've internalized it too; all those little things like feeling shitty, and somehow not quite myself, if I look in the mirror without having put on makeup or sprawling out on a couch and having a stray thought about how I might look (am I too big if I don't fold my legs? Do my shoulders look vaguely masculine if I relax into the seat?). It's a hell of a thing.

So I have an image in mind of you doing this work out in the field with your camera, though this field (of transmisogyny, of racism, and so on) encompasses the whole world, and I feel like Needlepoint could be a journal of your findings in addition to being a creative expression.

I think the question of memory bears on this too. A year or two ago, I was talking with Maria Andazola, a trans Latina writer, about

our mutual feeling of having very little sense of who we were before transitioning, how we had such a tenuous, uncertain sense of the past, and how poor our memories are in general. And when she made post about it, the response she got from other trans women who related to those feelings around memory was so much more immediate and broader than either of us had anticipated. It was depressing to hear there are so many of us struggling with this, but it helped to talk about it and think through some probable causes (all this interrelated stuff of trauma, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, etc.) and to know that I wasn't alone in going through it. Were you thinking about something along these lines where you wrote about the decay of memory over time in your artist's statement? I'd also love to hear your thoughts on the interplay between the needle (tightly in focus) and the background (undefined, and perhaps increasingly distant) as it relates to memory.

Aoi: I have such a terrible and spotty memory of my life like, pre-transition, or honestly really, most of my life before I figured out that I'm trans, and even at that, I don't think I really had a full sense of self until very recently, to be honest. I don't think I made that direct of a comparison with myself when I was writing my artist statement, but yeah, I guess that's a good way of explaining the idea behind the decay in memory. I think for women like us, one of the ways we lose childhood memories, how they decay is, at least for me, I don't like to think about who I was before I came out and transitioned. I don't like that person. They effectively, weren't me as I am now.

The largely undefined and indeterminate nature of the backgrounds to the photos in *Needlepoint* is largely a consequence of the process used to photograph the needle and for me, a memory starts with a moment. That moment is clear and defined, sharp like the needle, but the event was more than that moment. There's

a kind of haze for more distant memories, details are blurry. Historically, we've used photography to combat the haze of memory. At the start, it was a science with the goal of perfectly preserving an image of realism. I mostly work in these original photo processes that we hoped might capture a perfect memory, and ultimately too, *Needlepoint* will be printed in one of these processes, hopefully those prints will outlive the memory of what they were intended to stand for.

Needlepoint is absolutely a record of my findings and experiences with racism and transmisogyny, but I think that describes all of my work. I think it's inseparable from my work because I'm so deeply entrenched in it. I make art to sort out my life, I make it primarily about my own life. I don't think transmisogyny or racism or any other form of oppression is something I'll escape, not to be a downer, but it's so hard to hang on to optimism at that scale these days.

Jamie: I'd almost forgotten about this, but these original photo processes involve shooting directly onto glass photographic plates rather than onto film, right? Is that what is called a daguerreotype?

I don't know if I'm working towards some conclusion, but I feel like there's something helpful here in thinking about the permanence of photographic images and the ways that photography (like writing/printing/engraving) has been used as a way of capturing the world, maintaining order, and keeping things under control. Like how the first states that came about thousands of years ago developed writing as a way to keep records of what was produced and sold, what was owned and what was owed.

It would be simplistic to say, well, permanence is bad because it tends to serve power and to keep violent social hierarchies in place, so we should reject writing and printing and photography. But I think there is some truth to that line of criticism, that these tools weren't created for us or our liberation, and they're not well suited

to our needs. Maybe permanence flows from power itself, and that's why we find ourselves now without much of a trans literature/art or a sense of history. That's why (recorded) history rejects us in the fact that the writing/ art of trans women of color tends to disappear shortly after our deaths, even if it gets recognition while we're alive. I know that much of the work Esdras Parra did in her lifetime has been lost and what remains has hardly been examined as trans lit. or translated apart from my own efforts; and the extraordinary work of Aiyyana Maracle, a Haudenosaunee trans woman artist who taught in Vancouver and passed away in 2016, is already vanishing. Even the book Aiyyana published is impossible to find now.

How have you worked through these concerns with regards to the life of your work? With this booklet series I've been trying to embrace impermanence, trying to be okay with essentially working underground, in a print form that seems downright disposable in comparison to the sturdiness and the worth of books. But it's painful to think that it wouldn't take much for the series and all of the work that you and I have done for this issue to be inaccessible to readers a few years from now. It's like we've been saying—there isn't an escape, this stuff keeps coming after us and our memory. But what else do we have to work with?

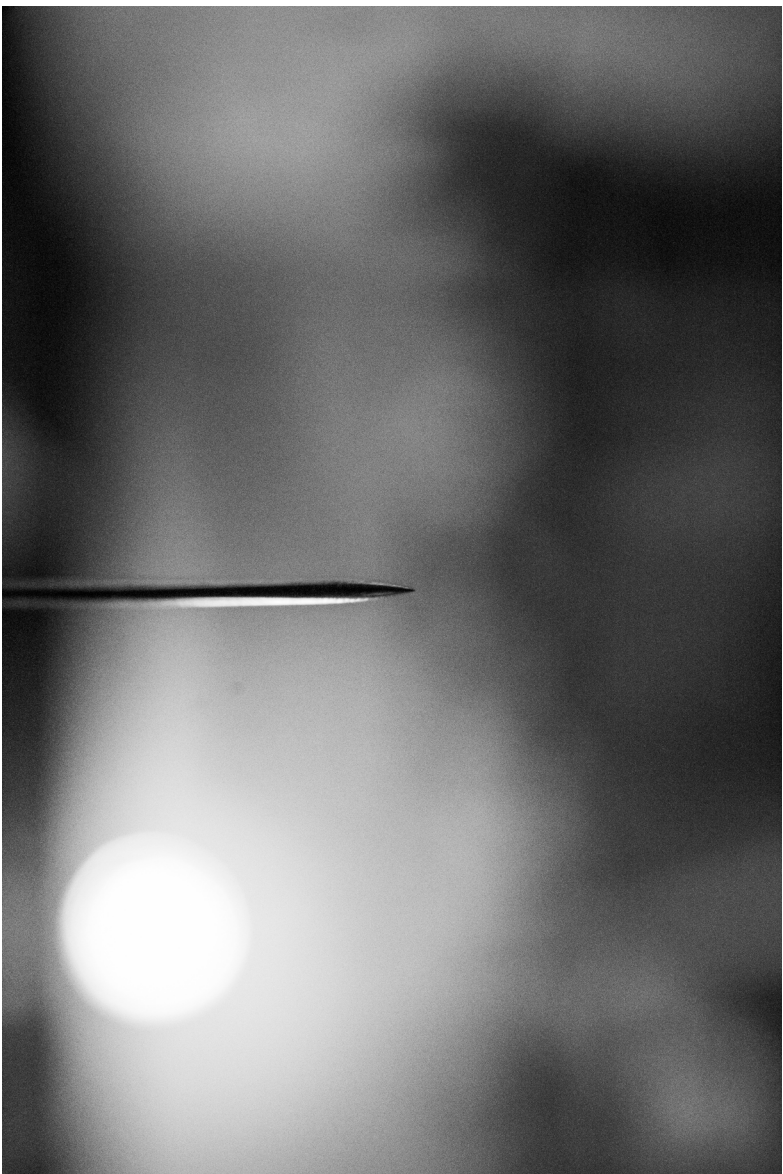
Aoi: I'm so annoyingly pedantic when it comes to historic process photography so I apologize, but what you described and what I like to work in most of the time is called wet plate collodion. A daguerreotype is a one of a kind single positive image actually on a silver plated copper plate. Daguerreotypes are a lot more dangerous and time intensive than wet plate and also unfortunately for my purposes, require too long of exposures for the kind of work that I do, but the reason they take so long is the same reason they have the highest fidelity of any photo capturing process.

It's difficult, I think for some people, to work in historic pro-

cess photography because you're automatically forced to confront the history of photography in a direct way, especially when you get deep into the rabbit hole, learning about this stuff from what was originally published in the 1800's and 1900's. It's a bourgeois field, really. Certainly, one gets a sense of historical oppressions even based on some of the chosen chemical compositions of emulsions at the time, like Kodak designing their film to poorly reproduce black skin.

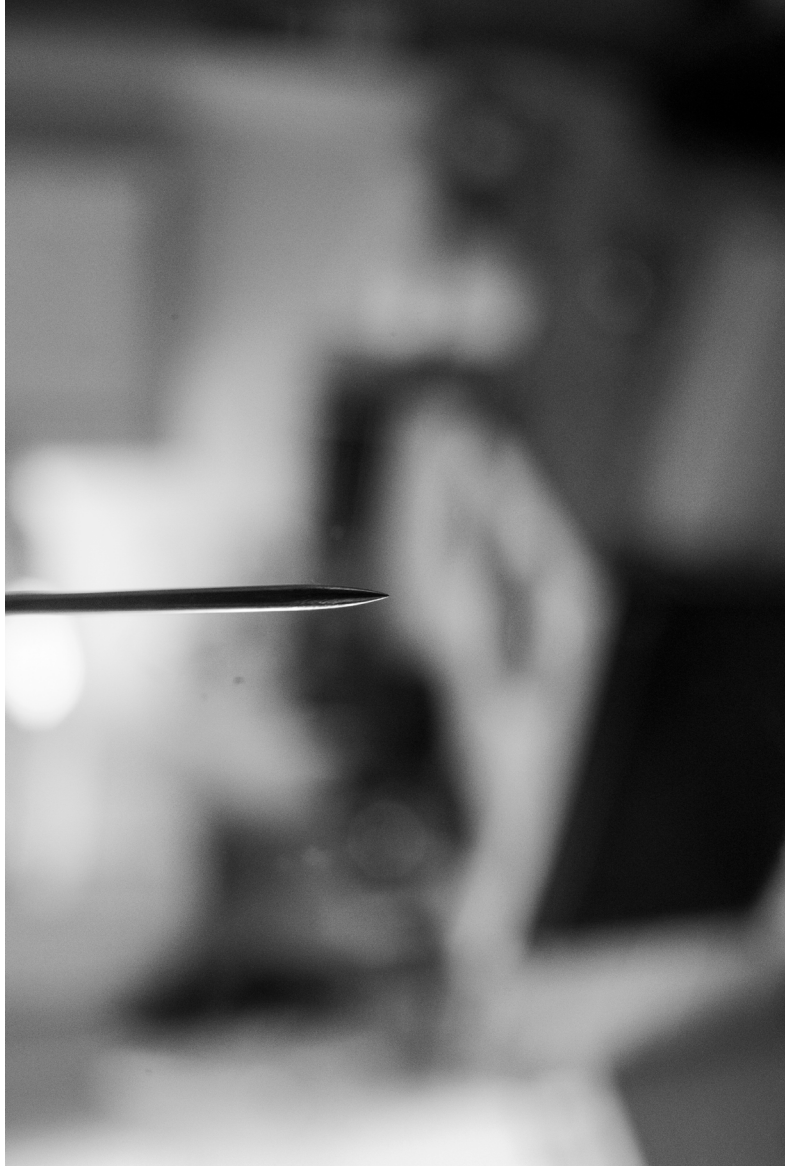
I work in these processes that are, when they're well taken care of, almost perfectly archival and when I try to sell these works in mainstream settings, that's a huge thing people look for these days, but that's really just a physical description of a work. It says nothing about how much value is assigned to it once it's left my possession. I give away a lot more art than I even attempt to sell, firstly just for a love of what I do, but also distributing my work at the volume that I try to I think increases my chances of it somehow surviving for even just a little longer than I will. I suppose I don't expect the powers that be to cherish my work and value it, but if I give it away to enough people, maybe one of those people will.

I was going to talk about how I didn't expect my work to survive beyond me, but somehow some way some of my work is held in a couple collections and at least two of my prints are currently on the track to being held in a museum collection, so I suppose, assuming neither the university that owns prints of mine or the museum that will be holding on to two of my prints for their collection burns down or is shut down, my work might still survive after me. And maybe someday, someone will stumble upon it by chance and it will get them thinking about making art, expressing their experiences and confronting the world, but I don't expect that.

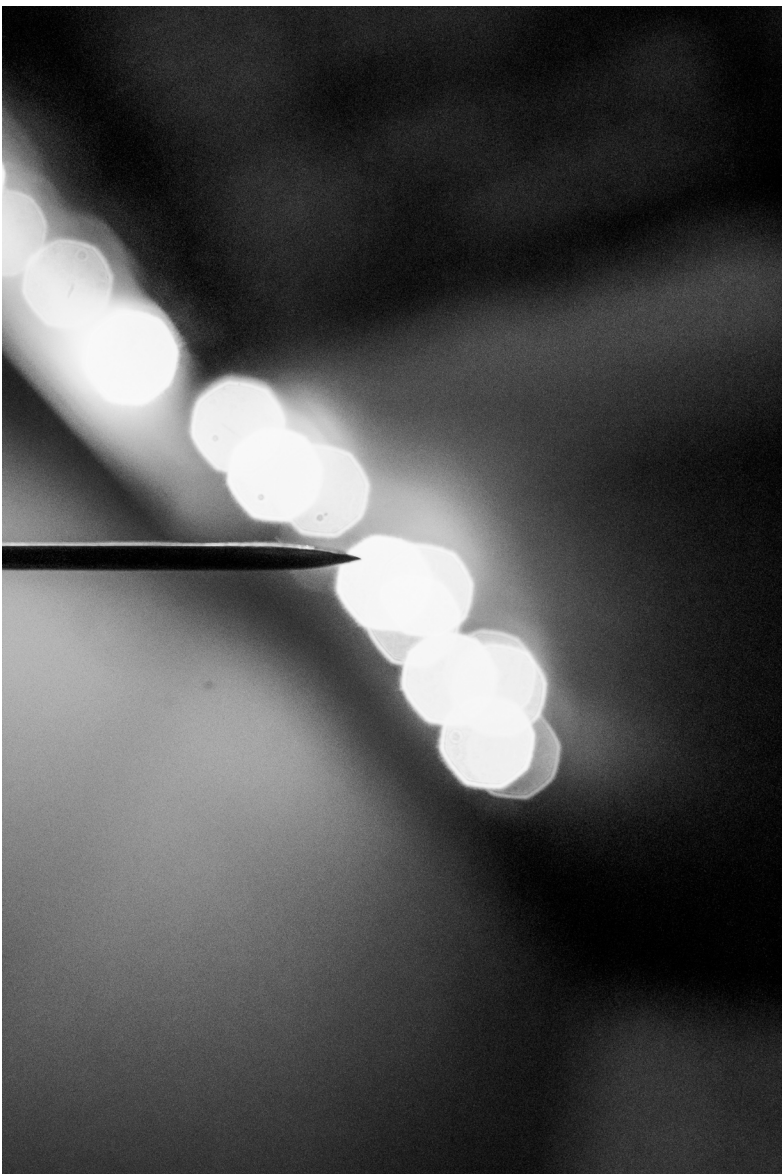








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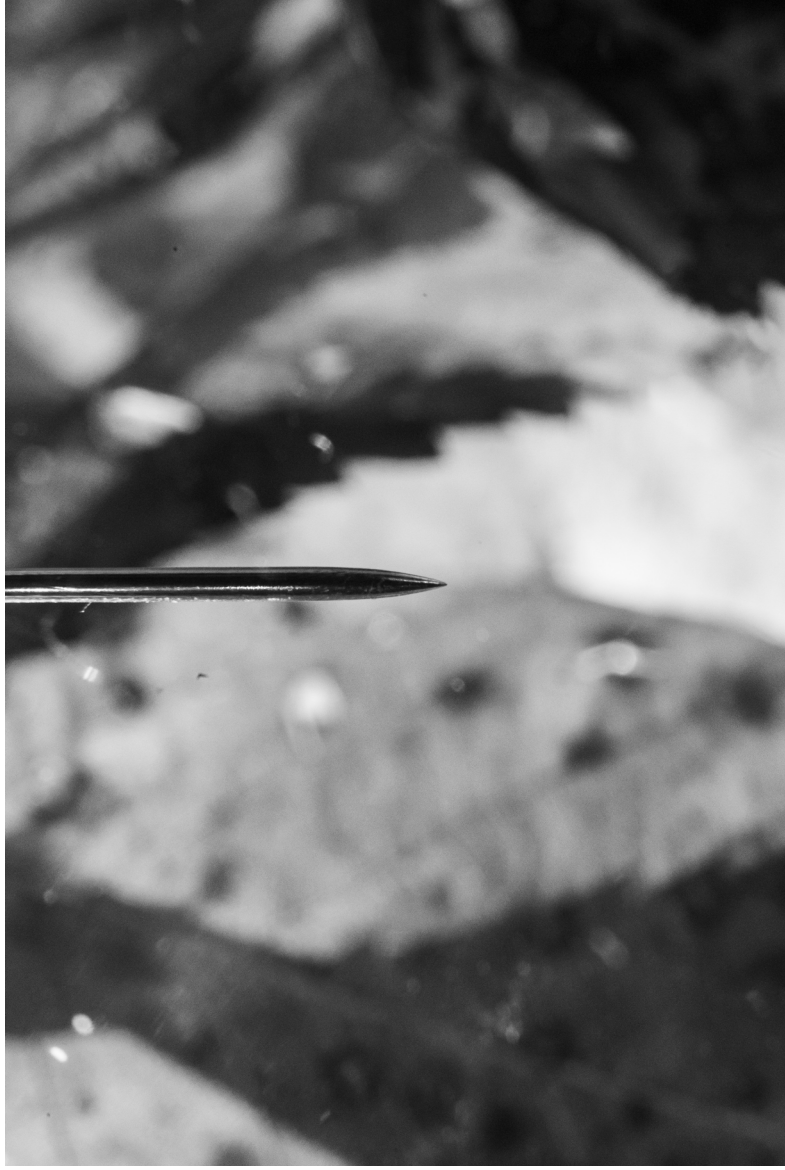
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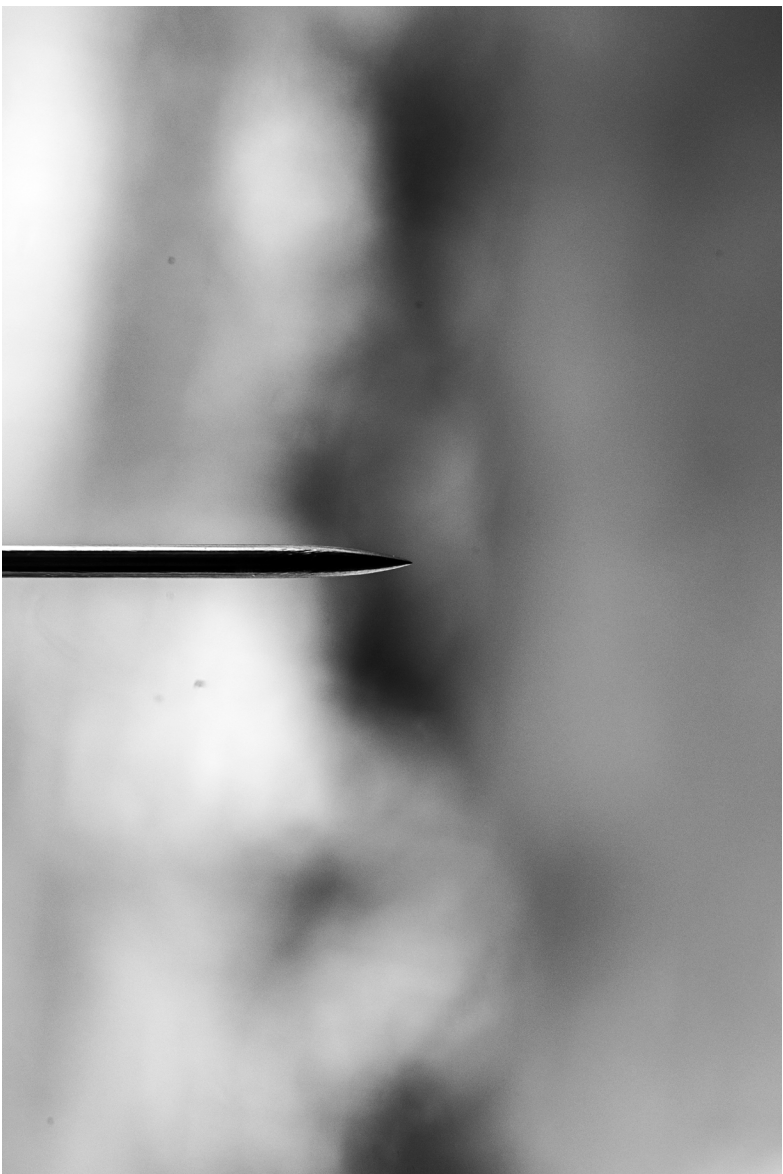
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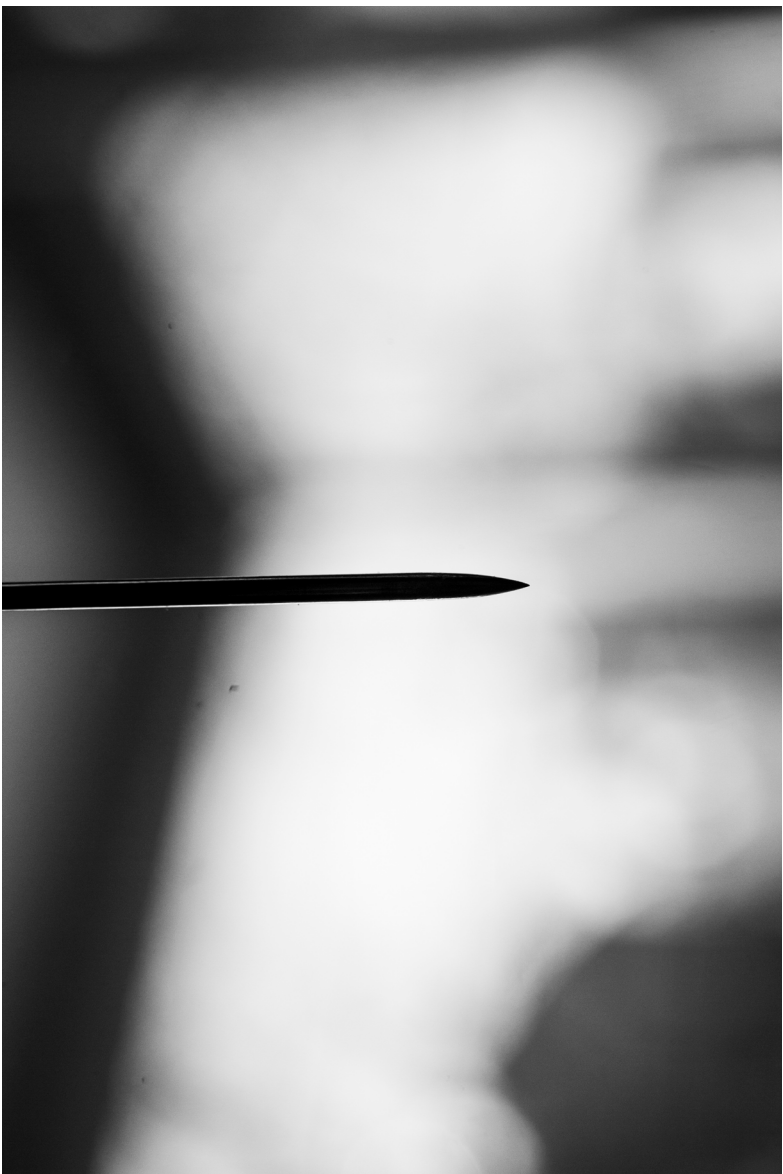
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